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Institute for a Community
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人类命运共同体研究院



Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers



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A Marketplace Without Walls

Picture a marketplace where a trader from Islamabad does business with a vendor from Kabul as easily as two shopkeepers on the same street, where cotton from Karachi finds its way to Central Asia almost as naturally as water flows downhill. That picture isn't fantasy. It's the regional potential we've left sitting on the table for decades.



Pakistan is standing at a genuine crossroads right now. We have a population of more than 230 million people and a location that nature itself seems to have designed as a bridge between South and Central Asia. And yet, year after year, old rivalries, stubborn trade barriers, and disjointed policy have kept that potential locked away.

So here's the question worth sitting with: what happens if we finally choose cooperation over conflict, bridges instead of walls?

CPEC Phase-II: More Than Just Roads and Ports

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has already pulled in billions of dollars in investment, turning Gwadar from a quiet fishing town into a modern port city and linking our infrastructure to Central Asian markets. But Phase-II is where things get personal. This is the phase that puts a human face on trade.

Why should an ordinary Pakistani care? Think about a small textile manufacturer in Faisalabad. Right now,





he can't really compete on a global stage because his products rarely make it past regional borders without getting tangled in red tape. CPEC Phase-II promises the infrastructure, the technology hubs, and the trade facilitation that could let him sell directly into Central Asian markets. His business grows. He hires more people. His family's future looks a little brighter.

This isn't abstract economic theory. It's a real, tangible shot at a better life for people who've been waiting a long time for one.

The second phase is built around a few key priorities:

- Industrial clusters and special economic zones that generate local jobs
- Digital connectivity linking Pakistani businesses to regional markets
- Skills development programs that prepare our workforce to compete globally
- Sustainable development that doesn't trade tomorrow's environment for today's growth

Regional Trade Agreements: Prosperity That Reaches Everyone

There's something almost simple about how trade agreements work: when barriers come down, opportunity goes up.

South Asia, despite our shared borders and deep cultural ties, has some of the lowest trade intensity of any major region in the world. Pakistan-India trade sits at roughly \$2 to \$3 billion a year, which is a small fraction of what our geography and population should be able to support.

Growth That Doesn't Skip the Ordinary Person

When tariffs fall and border procedures get simpler, costs come down too. And lower costs ripple outward: cheaper goods for consumers, healthier margins for small and medium-sized businesses, and sharper competitiveness in global markets.

A farmer in Punjab gets access to better seeds and equipment at a fairer price. A garment worker in Karachi becomes more productive. A student in Peshawar can finally afford the books and tools that used to be out of reach.

Jobs, Not Just Numbers

ASEAN's experience shows that regional integration doesn't just lift big industries; it creates jobs across logistics, services, hospitality, and finance too. For a country wrestling with stubborn youth unemployment, that's not a footnote. That's real hope.

Ideas Travel Too

When economies open up to each other, so do ideas. Pakistani tech entrepreneurs could start working alongside Afghan innovators. Sri Lanka's sustainable farming methods could help our own farmers. Bangladesh's decades of textile know-how could sharpen Pakistani manufacturing. None of this requires us to reinvent anything, just to start talking to our neighbours.

What ASEAN Can Teach Us About Stability

ASEAN's journey from a conflict-prone region to an integrated economic bloc holds some genuinely useful lessons for us.

It didn't happen because every dispute magically disappeared. It happened because leaders chose to put shared economic interest ahead of old grievances. A few things stand out from their playbook:



- Non-interference in internal affairs lets neighbouring countries coexist despite their differences



- Small, incremental steps tend to work better than sweeping, dramatic gestures
- Multilateral institutions build trust slowly, through repeated, ordinary cooperation
- Free movement of capital, goods, and people creates the kind of interdependence that makes conflict expensive for everyone

For Pakistan and our neighbours, that translates into something practical:

- Reviving SAARC doesn't mean resolving every dispute on day one
- Bilateral agreements can move forward even while tensions persist elsewhere
- Sub-regional cooperation, like a Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia corridor, can thrive on its own track
- People-to-people connections quietly lay the groundwork that political agreements later build on

SAARC Reimagined for a Post-Afghanistan Region

Afghanistan's transformation since 2021 has reshaped the regional landscape in ways nobody can ignore. But instead of treating that as a dead end, there's a real opportunity here to rethink what regional cooperation could look like.

Peace Built Through Commerce

An Afghanistan-Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity corridor creates a natural incentive for stability. When trade depends on secure borders and functioning institutions, conflict starts costing everyone money, which tends to concentrate minds wonderfully.

Working Together on Shared Problems

Pandemics, climate change, refugee movements. These challenges don't respect borders, and they can't be solved by any one country alone. Economic platforms built on cooperation tend to handle this kind of crisis far better than standoffs and posturing ever could.



Reconnecting Through Culture and Education

Pakistani universities could build real partnerships with institutions across South Asia. Scholarships could quietly build a generation of leaders who understand each other as people, not just headlines. Cultural exchange has a way of reminding us how much we share, even alongside everything that makes us different.

The Quiet Cost of Standing Still

It's easy to talk about economic integration in the language of GDP growth and trade volumes. But behind every one of those numbers is a person, a family, a missed chance.

Here's what the status quo actually costs us:

- A teenager in Lahore applies for a visa to see family in Afghanistan, and gets turned down despite generations of ancestral ties
- A Pakistani entrepreneur spots a real opportunity in Nepal, and the bureaucratic maze talks her out of even trying
- A Bangladeshi medical student who could bring real expertise to Pakistan is blocked by visa restrictions before she even starts
- Cross-border trade takes days of paperwork when it should take hours

These aren't small annoyances we can shrug off. They're opportunities we've lost, potential we've left unused, and talent we've let go to waste.

So, What Do We Actually Do About It?

Turning this vision into something real means taking concrete steps, not just talking about ideals.

In the Next One to Two Years

- Simplify visa procedures for businesspeople and students



- Build modern border trading posts that actually work
- Launch joint trade promotion councils with neighbouring countries
- Start bilateral agreements in specific sectors like agriculture, IT, and textiles

Over the Next Three to Five Years

- Extend CPEC Phase-II benefits more broadly across the region
- Establish joint industrial zones with regional partners
- Create real student and professional exchange programs
- Harmonize technical standards and regulations so trade actually flows

Looking Five Years and Beyond

- Build out a genuinely comprehensive SAARC framework
- Integrate labour markets carefully and strategically, not recklessly
- Invest in shared regional infrastructure projects
- Set up regional institutions for dispute resolution and ongoing cooperation

The Choice in Front of Us

Future generations won't judge us by the conflicts we managed to survive. They'll judge us by the partnerships we actually chose to build.

Pakistan has an opportunity here that doesn't come along often. We have the geography, the people, the resources, and increasingly, the infrastructure too. What's missing isn't capability. It's the vision and the political will to step past old constraints.

Regional economic integration isn't wishful thinking. It's a clear-eyed recognition that our futures are tied together whether we admit it or not. When our neighbours do well, we do well. When the region finds stability, we find stability. When we cooperate, we get stronger, together.



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ASEAN already proved this is possible. The real question left for us is simpler than it sounds: will we choose prosperity over endless tension? Will we build something our children will actually thank us for?

That marketplace I described at the start isn't a daydream. It's a decision.

And that decision starts today.